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ABSTRACT

Interviews were conducted with three learning disabled young people over a period of 8 years, beginning when they were in junior high school. The interviews reveal common themes related to the effects of a lack of vocational training and the inability to maintain adequate employment. Jerry experienced a pattern of temporary work followed by periods collecting unemployment benefits. Christy obtained only sporadic employment with pay so low that she could not live on her own. Jesse's skills were so low that he became discouraged by his low level of pay and refused to work for less than $10 per hour. He continued to live at home with his mother. The literature indicates that in 1990, the median hourly wage for adolescents with learning disabilities was $5.72, representing an annual income of less than $12,000. Only about 60 percent of working, learning disabled youth received medical insurance benefits or paid vacation. Although the employment rate for graduates with learning disabilities is respectable, a high percentage are employed part-time in low-status occupations. High percentages live with family. Contains 23 references. (CDS)

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TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF EMPLOYMENT TRENDS FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

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Abstract

The plight of students with disabilities has been in the spotlight for several years now. Recent legislation has made vocational training including students with disabilities a mainstay in most secondary schools. While there are studies that prove that training in a vocational setting does have a positive influence on students with learning disabilities, there are still ways in which the results are less impressive. With the increased number of students with learning disabilities not being able to maintain adequate time on the job, concerned parents and educators seek answers to unending questions. Some questions that come to the minds of many are such as a) when a student with a learning disability cannot find a job or keep a job, what does he/she do with their time and b) how does this affect their life (i.e. physically or mentally)? In as much as the effort to overcome disability is actively sought for by many, the effects of learning disabilities on young peoples' lives are unlikely to be eliminated entirely. Whereas disability implies a reduction in function that may influence the outcomes of people for a lifetime, this paper reveals interviews from three students who have discussed their own problems with unemployment or underemployment, their dreams of success, and their worries about the future. The conclusion examines implications for teacher education and special education in general.

Educators from various levels in the field are increasingly concerned with the problems and anxieties of the young men and women who occupy the seats in many junior high special education classrooms. These students often seem to be experiencing anxieties, but none that can be considered any different from any other teen aged youth. The boys will talk about girls and why they cannot get dates. The girls capture each other's attention by mentioning a boy's name that they all think they love madly. Nothing out of the ordinary, or so it seems at the time.

Outcomes for Students with Learning Disabilities

Current literature confirms that most young Americans with disabilities do not spend four years in college. Few students with LD (learning disability) go on to post-secondary training. In a national survey conducted by the American Council on Education, students with LD accounted for only 1.1% of all full-time, first-time entering college freshmen (Hippolitus, 1987). Wagner (1989) and her colleagues followed approximately 8,000 youths ages 13-23 with disabilities and reported that approximately 16% of students with LD entered post-secondary programmes. Of these, 1.6% enrolled in 4-year colleges and universities, 4.9% in 2-year colleges, and 11.1% in vocational schools.

Individuals with learning disabilities have encountered many challenges in seeking employment following exit from high school. For students whose plans have not included college, making a successful adjustment from high school to post-high school situations has been a dilemma. Jobless individuals with learning disabilities have often lived within the extremes of poverty and dependence. Often however, the students are unaware of the problems and tribulations that are ahead.

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For some junior high school age students, graduating from high school means entering a vocational school or trade school to "learn a trade". Many towns now have local community colleges that offer vocational courses such as electrical technology, engineering and graphics design, industrial trades programmes, and nursing. Along the same path, there are several hair design/cosmetology colleges in the nearby area where usually the females enrolls to become hair stylists, manicurists, pedicurists, or a combination thereof.

Yet, for the majority of youths, who are in special education classes, a high school education will be the final opportunity for them to learn the skills critical to success in the world of work. Leaving high school means finding a job as soon as possible. Many of the youths want to be "out on their own". According to Halpern (1994), students at this age have a distinct manner about them by which they think they know everything there is to know and are defiant about authority.

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were used in this investigation and common themes are illustrated by three students versions of how their lives have been effected by the lack of vocational training and/or the ability to maintain adequate employment. When possible, a personal interview was conducted. The researcher attempted to stay consistent with guidelines for the qualitative research pre-fieldwork which Stainback and Stainback (1988) refers to as the exploration of research sites. While pre-conceptions can interfere with the research, this study interviewed participants in domains not familiar to the researchers' repertoire. The interview consisted of open-ended questions, which were recorded, and later transcribed into a written format.

Through interviews of three students, themes are revealed within their stories that are common throughout the interviews of all students. Three students are mentioned to tell their stories through a period of 8 years. From 1990 when they were in the comfort and security of a junior high resource room to 1998, where the researcher has tracked their progression through the world of work, education and life. Here you encounter the stories from Jerry, Christy, and Jesse and how they are doing five to eight years after graduating from high school.

Interviews

Jerry

Jerry and his parents are long-time residents of a small town south of Houston Texas. He was diagnosed as learning disabled when he was in sixth grade. He made passing grades in high school and had hopes of being a forest ranger. As Jerry tells his interview, he speaks with a smile yet his head is down. His voice is low yet has glimmers of hope within. I have asked Jerry how he makes a living for himself:

> I draw an unemployment check when I'm not working construction. I took metal shop in high school and I went to the community college for a couple of semesters. I learned about mill-right work. But sometimes the jobs don't last long and so I go back and apply for unemployment. I usually get some help from Salvation Army or the government cheese or butter. I go to thrift stores to buy jeans and winter apparel.

While Jerry collects unemployment insurance, he supplements his checks with a favorite hobby of hunting and trapping and selling some of his captures to local fur buyers. The total earnings from these exchanges usually do not amount to much more than what was spent to kill the animals. Jerry never has any extra spending money; probably because he works for minimum wage only, which affords little of the known luxuries in life.

Other research reveals that despite wage advances, the median hourly wage for adolescents with learning disabilities still was just at $5.72 in 1990, representing an annual income of less than $12,000 for youths with disabilities who were employed full-time and year round. For individuals employed part time, which is most often the case, this figure is even lower. Moreover, about 60% of working youths

received medical insurance benefits or paid vacation. These benefits were much more common among those who worked full-time or worked for higher wages. With such staggering figures, employers and educators concerned with the vocational aspects of these youths seek ways to improve the chances of these individuals getting better jobs (Wagner, Blackorby, Hebbeler, & Newman, 1993).

Jerry's work pattern is to work long enough at a construction job to qualify for unemployment insurance and then quit or take voluntary redundancy staff cut backs. This entitles him to receive unemployment compensation for a period of time. When the unemployment money has expired or has been depleted, he goes back to work in which after an unknown period of time, usually brief, he is laid off again and he is back at the unemployment office, filing for unemployment insurance. Research suggests that early employment experiences can be influential in the success that youth with disabilities ultimately achieve in the labor market. Further, early work experiences can also influence work-related behaviors that may stay with people throughout their working lives (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). Jerry is in his middle twenties, unmarried and has no real future plans in sight.

> "I had a nice girlfriend for three years but she recently decided to not be involved with me. She said I had no future and was always broke."

The cycle of temporary work, collect unemployment, and receive government aid is one all too often familiar to post-secondary high school students with learning disabilities. Approximately eight out of every ten able-bodied working age Americans have a job, but only one out of every ten Americans with a learning disability is considered a full-time employee (Woodard, 1993). With such disproportionate ratios, it is probably correct to contend that citizens with LD comprise a large part of the unemployed in the country. Whether or not this is a life-style of choice is not the issue here, but rather if students such as the one in the scenario above would have a better quality of life, as described by some researchers (e.g. Esgrow, 1978; Halpern, 1992; Okolo & Sitlington, 1988) if better transition services in high school were provided to students with learning disabilities. The findings of the current interview are similar to those expressed in a recent report entitled, "National Longitudinal Transition Study", generated by Blackorby et.al (1996) discussing the findings relevant to the world of work and how students with disabilities fuse into the real world after leaving high school. Given that the early years after high school have been described as a floundering period for many youth (Halpern, 1992), a view past the first few post-school years is essential to have an accurate picture of youth accomplishments. Although success in employment does not necessarily correlate with success in other facets of life (Halpern, 1985), it clearly is a major factor of youths' chances to achieve economic and residential independence.

Christy:

Christy is a young woman in the eighth grade in 1993. She was labeled as learning disabled and somewhat withdrawn. In addition to cognitive delays, Christy also suffered from several physical maladies which seemed to create some minor disturbances in the learning and social process. She, since birth, had become constantly burdened with a moderately severe skin disease, which caused her skin to be chronically irritated and scaly. As a result, throughout the class period, Christy would scratch and claw at her arms or legs. She had female problems by which at the age of 18 she received a hysterectomy because the doctor had warned her that, because of her illness childbirth could be fatal. Even though Christy had a loving and caring mother, she did not have the educational background to continue to post secondary education. Christy expressed satisfaction with some aspects of her job, yet disappointment too:

> Since high school, I have worked in several service jobs. I was in a few vocational classes in high school and really learned a lot from them. I especially enjoyed the health care profession where I worked as nurses' aide in a home for elderly people and also for old people

with crippling diseases. The pay was not enough for me to move out on my own. I lived with a girlfriend for awhile but I didn't want that either. Then I moved in with my boyfriend for a couple of months but decided that I didn't love him, so I moved out. Right now, (pause), I'm back at home with my parents. I get depressed a lot. Sometimes when I get down I get in my car and drive. I just drive to wherever until whenever. It may be 3:00 am when I finally go home. I want to do something with my life but I don't know what. One day I would like to be a teacher. I'm good with kids and I could teach them a lot.

Christy's story substantiates research that elaborates on the effects of unemployment and/or underemployment on an individual's mental and physical health. A large number of studies have shown that the unemployed or underemployed are less healthy, both physically and psychologically, than the employed (e.g.; Kessler, House, & Turner, 1985; Mastekaasa, 1996; Price, B., 1995; Warr, Jackson & Banks,1988). This interview also reveals Christy's desires as a young woman who wants to have a success story rather than to continue the stream of failures she has already encountered in her youthful life.

Jesse:

Jesse graduated in 1992 from a high school in a rural southern Texas town. He had been in special education resource classes from grades 8 through 12. His mother, being a special education teacher in a nearby district, was distraught and afraid that Jesse couldn't do the work in a regular class. He was failing several core subjects and began missing school frequently. Upon testing, Jesse was found to have a learning disability in written and oral expression. It was upon the parent's request that Jesse be placed in special education classes. Since graduation, Jesse has spent the last 6 years being unemployed or under-employed.

Well, what can I say? I'm 25 years old and I'm bored to death with life.

I get up every morning and feed my dogs. Then I go check my hog traps and trot lines that I've got set out on the river. I've been selling fish and wild game meat to restaurants and buyers who purchase the meat for resale to businesses around the area. I have tried to work at different jobs. Once I had a job loading hay and baling hay. But that is seasonal and not very steady. I tried to get on as a truck driver for a local delivery company but they wouldn't hire me because of my reading and writing skills. I also did not have any type of computer skills. I hate computers. So, they didn't hire me. I'm so fed up with trying to get a decent job. I would like to make good money, but they all tell me that I have to start at the bottom and work my way up to the top. That's baloney! I'm not going to do that. If I can't make at least $10.00 per hour, then I just won't work. I'll just keep living here with my mother.

Constant failure by students with learning disabilities creates barriers for the students that often are too difficult to ever tear down. Moreover, these individuals frequently received little vocational counseling in high school. While there has been suggestions by Halpern (1992) expressing concerns about the narrow manner of community adjustment have been structured in follow-up studies of former special education students, secondary schools still have difficulties giving useful and productive instruction for students to succeed in the world of work. In another report Barton (1990) illuminates the idea that transition for many students to the world of work is often left unaided and "left to chance" (p.6). Barton (1990) focused on five main aspects of the transition of these individuals into the workforce. He highlighted the differences between classroom skills and work-place skills by pointing out that although many students are prepared in terms of the secondary school curriculum, those skills mastered by high school students are not ones deemed desirable by employers. On a similar vein, Rist (1981) suggested that most high school students who want to work immediately upon leaving high school receive little or no guidance. This fact was reinforced by Northruft (1990) who stated, "They are simply released to a labor market that has little to offer them and has little interest in what they learned in school" (p. 10).

Conclusion

Authors of employment/life satisfaction status question the efficacy of whether students with learning disabilities are making a successful integration into adulthood. Some researchers believe the answer is "not as well as they could be", (Sitlington & Frank, 1990; Okolo & Sitlington, 1988; Halpern, 1992; Zigmond & Thorton, 1985; Hasazi, Gordon & Roe 1985). Although the employment rate for graduates with learning disabilities is respectable and almost all individuals who are employed are in competitive employment, still a high percentage of these individuals are in part-time employment with low-status occupations. High percentages are still living at home. In addition, the results for females are much more discouraging. The individuals in the study done by Sitlington & Frank (1990) were high functioning, as evidenced by intelligence scores, math scores, and reading test scores.

As an educator and concerned citizen, I believe that there are no easy answers to the nation's most productive commodity: our children's future. I do not advocate any form of programme where the main component is a "one size fits all" philosophy. As is illustrated in the lives of only three of thousands of students with learning disabilities, each life is different with different variables creating either havoc or contentment. As special educators and general educators, we must bridge the gap between unemployment and unfulfilled lives of youths with learning disabilities and find ways to ensure more viable solutions to the problems they encounter on a daily basis.

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